



# THE INFINITE IMAGE

ART, TIME AND THE AESTHETIC  
DIMENSION IN ANTIQUITY

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*To the memory of Donald P. Hansen*

Published by Reaktion Books Ltd  
33 Great Sutton Street  
London EC1V 0DX, UK  
[www.reaktionbooks.co.uk](http://www.reaktionbooks.co.uk)

First published 2014

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Published with the assistance of the Getty Foundation

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Printed and bound in China by 1010 International Printing Ltd

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78023 277 5

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PARIS. - 39. rue La Boétie.

Prix : 15 fr.

ONE

## Ancient Art: The Aesthetic Dimension

THE OPENING ARTICLE of the first issue of the Surrealist journal *Documents*, edited and published by Georges Bataille in 1929, is devoted to Sumerian sculpture. The author of this essay was Georges Contenau, a scholar who had worked on eastern Mediterranean archaeology and who was at the time chief curator of Oriental antiquities at the Louvre museum. While it may seem odd to us now that Bataille would commission such an article for the first volume of his new Surrealist journal, this is only because we have mostly forgotten the enthusiastic reception of Mesopotamian artworks in the early part of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, Sumer, with its earliest evidence of writing and its extraordinary sculptured artefacts, was an exciting new discovery for artists and writers – and for large sectors of the general public in London, Paris and Berlin, and also in Baghdad and Istanbul. Perhaps more than any other find, it was Leonard Woolley's excavations at Ur that had stirred the popular imagination. The Royal Cemetery of Ur, with its shocking evidence of human sacrifice and massive amounts of precious objects wrought of gold and lapis lazuli, was a stunning discovery that effectively turned the attention of the world to southern Iraq, where Woolley and others were then excavating. Before this, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, French excavations at Telloh had already brought new and strange sculptures to Paris, sculptures that had captured the attention of the art world. But the interest of avant-garde artists and thinkers in Europe, including Britain, seems to have been inspired as much, if not more, by what they saw as the oddly abstract aesthetic form in Sumerian art, and by a vital presence in that form, than



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by its historical context. Bataille and the group of renegade Surrealists associated with *Documents* saw these works as fitting among a range of 'irritating objects' – counter-intuitive things from non-Western and pre-classical societies that could lead to new directions of thought about art and culture. Bataille, in fact, described the journal as 'a war machine against received ideas' which he felt would lead to an 'unthinking' of normative categories.<sup>1</sup>

Around the same time, between 1927 and 1935, the Surrealist sculptor Alberto Giacometti, after viewing and sketching ancient statues at the Louvre, including a series of sketches of Gudea, ruler of the ancient city of Lagash, incorporated ancient Near Eastern art forms and types into his work. Giacometti made a number of studies of Mesopotamian and Egyptian works of art that were exhibited at the Louvre, but also of several more

Sumerian Gallery,  
Louvre, Paris.



Alberto Giacometti, *Study after a Sumerian Sculpture*,  
*Gudea*, c. 1935, ink on paper.

*Gudea* seated, from Telloh (Girsu), Iraq, c. 2150 BC,  
diorite.

Statue of a woman, Sumerian, from Telloh (Girsu),  
Iraq, c. 2140 BC, chlorite.



Near Eastern sculptures that were housed at other museums in Europe. The Giacometti sketches of Mesopotamian antiquities, many of them drawn in blue ballpoint pen, have a sense of immediacy in the line that is evocative of the direct encounter with the work, an aesthetic experience that the Surrealists valued and sought in non-Western and ancient artefacts. They exemplified what Giacometti's contemporary, the jazz musician and assistant director of Paris's Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Georges Henri Rivière, had called for in his essay on 'Archéologismes' (published in the leading art journal *Cahiers d'art* in 1926) – a means of dealing with a new range of art forms that had entered their world.<sup>2</sup> The aim of *Documents*, which included ancient Near Eastern sculpture, was thus to present a wide range of works from outside the West, including pre-classical antiquity. The journal's self-proclaimed goal was the promotion of experimental thinking spurred by these new discoveries and encounters with other worlds, both the ancient and unfamiliar and the distant and exotic.

At the same time, New York City was fast becoming the world's new hub for modern art. The city's premier Museum of Modern Art opened in 1929 to much acclaim and became central to the construction of the narrative of the Modern. Alfred H. Barr, the Museum of Modern Art's first director, in an attempt to raise the level of investigation to that of a science, created a kind of 'flow chart' of the historical development of Modernism. This chart was central to the museum's seminal exhibition of 1936, 'Cubism and Abstract Art'; it not only appeared on the cover of the catalogue but was a crucial part of the genealogy or topology that guided the exhibition – and also guided the narrative of modern art advanced by the newly established museum. The chart constructed a logic for the organization of

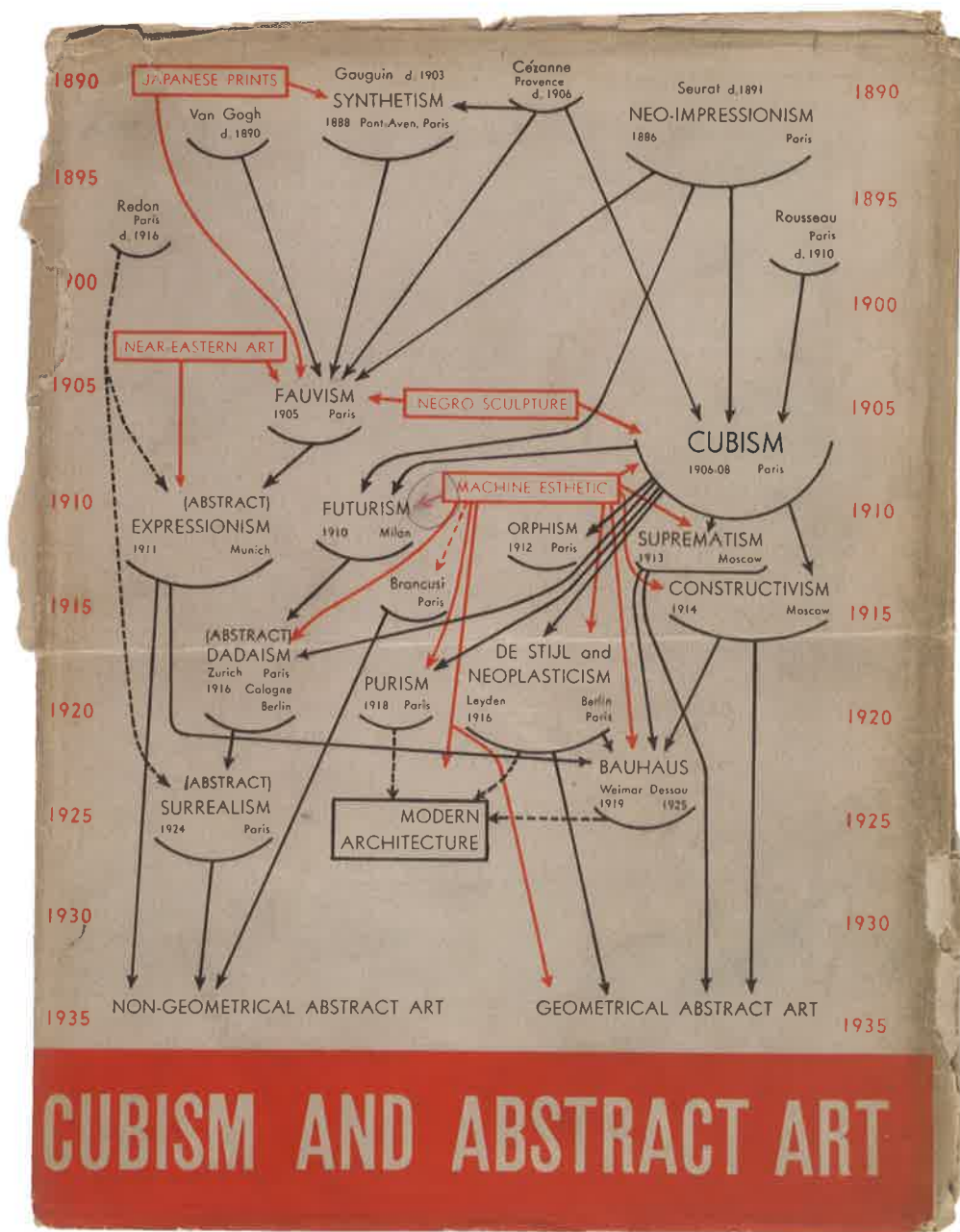


Sumerian statue inscribed with the name Kurilil, from Tell Al-'Ubaid near Ur, c. 2500 BC, greenstone.



Alberto Giacometti, *Study after a Sumerian Sculpture*, 1937, blue ballpoint on paper.





Alfred Barr, cover of the exhibition catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936).

Henry Moore in his studio, 1928.



the museum's galleries, a logic which formed the underpinning of the early history of Modernism and especially abstract art. It channelled the various trajectories of modern art through Fauvism and especially Cubism, culminating in either 'non-geometric abstract art' or 'geometric abstract art'. Importantly, Barr's diagram gave ancient Near Eastern Art a prominent position of external influence on Cubism and Abstraction, a fact that has somehow escaped later scholarship.

During the same period, in Britain, Henry Moore was also deeply influenced by Sumerian sculpture. In 1935, he wrote a now forgotten article on Mesopotamian art in which he lauded Sumerian works as being among the greatest sculpture in the world. He declared:

For me, Sumerian sculpture ranks with Greek, Etruscan, Ancient Mexican, Fourth and Twelfth Dynasty Egyptian, and Romanesque and early Gothic sculpture as the great sculpture of the world. It shows a richness of feeling for life and its wonder and mystery, welded to direct plastic statement born of a real creative urge.<sup>3</sup>

THE LISTENER, 5 JUNE 1935. Vol. XIII. No. 334. PRICE THREEPENCE

NATIONAL  
LECTURE

# The Listener

Published every Wednesday by the British Broadcasting Corporation



A Governor of Lagash

From 'L'Art de la Mésopotamie', by Christian Zervus (Geneva)

Mesopotamian Art. By Henry Moore . . . . . page 944



*Opposite*  
An issue of *The Listener*,  
featuring an article by  
Henry Moore, 1935.

*Gudea*, c. 2150 BC, in  
the British Museum,  
London.



Moore's young contemporary Laurence Josephs responded to viewing of the Gudea statue now at the British Museum by writing an ekphrastic poem:

In Lagash there lie sleeping, infinite things  
 Fragments of stone, green stone  
 Kneeling people come to him like shades  
 In the hidden regions of the room  
 The might of Lagash merges into mist  
 The sculptor's hands, clay heaping on clay  
 Here is the ponderer of life, thinking  
 Uplifted is his face as if to see  
 Cloudlets of fire in the clear sky  
 Gudea has sought his soul in ecstasy  
 And smiles. A featherweight defines  
 The yes from the no and I am over them  
 I smile to him, but he is far from me  
 See how he smiles, see how Gudea smiles.<sup>4</sup>

This evocative ekphrasis is not quite directly of the statue itself alone, but also of its mystical source – merging into mist – in the land of Lagash, with the ancient viewers and the hands of the Sumerian sculptor. The poet writes Gudea into his ancient context as if to say that the span of time between the modern viewer and the statue's world, the sculptor's hands and the land of Lagash are all brought together for a moment and are visible in the statue of Gudea. This is not the ancient magic of mimesis but it is akin to it nevertheless. It cuts across time, conjuring rather than reconstructing the real. Josephs's poem describes how a powerful presence in the image, solid as the dark-green diorite stone, merges with his own act of looking, or the viewer's gaze. He knows about the Sumerians, knows that these are archaeological remains, but to a great extent he responds to the statue as if it were a work of art. Was his a case of a mistaken gaze? Is his response the result of a category error? One school of thought among archaeologists and historians would dismiss this kind of attitude and

Or does the  
attitude separate  
aesthetic modern  
of engagement  
from historical  
ones.

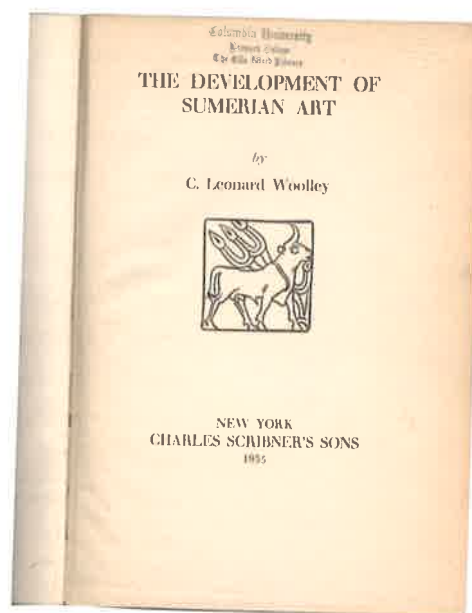
response to ancient sculpture as an imposition of a modern form of viewing, a modern gaze that enforces its own regime of art and levies its own value system onto what it sees as the truth of the ancient artefact.

For my part, I find that I am more sympathetic with Laurence Josephs. There is something in the ancient sculpture, a presence that transcends time and that also makes and marks time, an aspect of the work that was recognized and even intended by its original Sumerian makers but that archaeological scholarship has dismissed far too quickly. It is exactly this uncanny encounter with the work across the vast expanses of time that the ancient Mesopotamians understood particularly well and that I wish to explore in this book. My point is that conjuring a presence in images meant for all time is not merely an anachronistic imposition of a modern aesthetic response, but an aesthetic and philosophical conception of images and monuments that can clearly be supported by the ancient texts and archaeological evidence. In fact, in the case of the British Museum *Gudea*, the authentic condition, whatever that may be, the integrity of the ancient statue, was compromised less by an artist's view or assessment than by the museum's ill-conceived restoration. The green diorite surface admired by Josephs was blackened with wax, and the entire statue was elongated by means of an additional restoration to its lower part. Rather than any leading archaeologist of the time, it was actually the sculptor Henry Moore who disparaged this restoration in his essay on Mesopotamian art, saying, 'the effect of this figure has been ruined by the way it has been abominably mounted on a wooden stand which is a kind of reconstruction of the remainder of the figure.'<sup>5</sup>

The young Laurence Josephs, Alberto Giacometti, Henry Moore and other early twentieth-century artists permitted themselves to look at these artefacts in a way that was not sanctioned by the scientific archaeology of their own time. The Surrealist interest in the immediacy of things and the experiential encounter led them to the arts of Africa, to artefacts categorized as ethnographic objects and the world of twentieth-century anthropology. This is a well-known and problematic point of reference and influence for the Surrealists that has been extensively studied in relation to anthropology and

ethnographic critique in recent years. James Clifford has pointed out that in France, ethnography and Surrealism developed at the same time, and that the unspoken history of both of these entailed colonial power relations and cultural hierarchies within museums and institutions in the West, even though the Surrealist stance was vehemently anti-colonial.<sup>6</sup> Yet, albeit to a lesser extent, this interest in the exotic also led the avant-garde to the pre-Greek and pre-classical world of the Near East. In both cases, what they sought in these works seems to have been the unexpected object, the type of thing that could call into question normative categories of thought and open up new forms of response. Clifford's contextualization of ethnographic Surrealism, and his criticism of the affinities claimed with so-called primitive works by the Modernist avant-garde, have indeed now become broadly accepted. On the other hand, their fascination with the pre-classical archaeological object has not received much attention, despite the fact that archaeology was listed as one of the main topics in the subtitle of the journal *Documents*. The early twentieth-century interest in archaeological artefacts proceeded in yet another direction, equally entangled in political power structures and racialism but tied more closely to developments in art-historical rather than anthropological discourse.

In many ways, these avant-garde artists and thinkers admired ancient Near Eastern works, especially the Sumerian, which they saw as indeed being works of art of some kind, no matter how they might differ in function from the modern, and this was a rather different response from that expressed by some of the most famous excavators of the time. Sir Leonard Woolley, for example, wrote a book called *The Development of Sumerian Art* in 1935 and was not, it seems from his writing, an admirer of Near Eastern art himself, even though the sensational find of the Royal Cemetery was so important for his fame as an excavator. In his attempt at art criticism, Woolley, like many archaeologists of the time, equated art forms with



Title-page, from  
C. Leonard Woolley,  
*The Development of  
Sumerian Art* (New  
York, 1935).

race. He described the Gudea statues as 'exposing the tragedy of the Sumerian by means of their contradictory forms' and early Mesopotamian relief sculpture as excellent in detail but deplorable in composition, with excessive ornament that is an outrage to design.<sup>7</sup> Even the journal *Documents*, despite its strong anti-racist and anti-colonial bent, did not escape this kind of 'seeing race in artefacts', the direction promoted by scholars of antiquity as the more scientific and objective method. In his essay on Sumerian sculpture in *Documents*, the French curator of antiquities Georges Contenau also sought to explain certain forms of abstraction favoured in Sumerian sculpture as an exaggeration of a particular racial type, attempting to find similarities between the sculpture and the excavated skeletal remains from archaeological sites in the south of Iraq. Similar comments are later echoed in much of the work of the renowned art historian Henri Frankfort, who published details and images about sculpture from American excavations in the Diyala region, led by the University of Chicago, and wrote the standard handbook on ancient Near Eastern art.<sup>8</sup>

EVOLUTIONARY RACIAL THEORIES that saw Mesopotamia as the childhood of mankind (the often-termed 'cradle of civilization') were already established by the mid-nineteenth century. Woolley and other early archaeologists in the Middle East, however, seem to have been more interested in the biblical associations of the archaeological context of Ur as the birthplace of Abraham and in the fantastic remains of the so-called Royal Cemetery, soon to be brought to museums in London and Philadelphia and published in popular journals such as the *Illustrated London News*. In fact, before the find of the tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamun by Howard Carter in 1922, the West's fascination with Mesopotamia in the late nineteenth and at the start of the twentieth century even surpassed the well-known Egyptomania of that time. Classical antiquity had, of course, been incorporated into the domain of Western art since the Italian Renaissance, beginning first with the appropriation of Roman and Hellenistic antiquity; then gradually, by the eighteenth century, all things Greek became a focus of interest in



Johann Winckelmann,  
Präsidentens der Alterthümer zu Rom, und Scrittore der Vaticanischen Bibliothek,  
Mitglieds der Königl. Englischen Societät der Alterthümer zu London, der Maleracademie  
von St. Luca zu Rom, und der Petrurischen zu Cortona,

# Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums.

Erster Theil.



Mit Königl. Pohlnisch. und Churfürstl. Sächs. allernädigsten Privilegio.

Dresden, 1764.

In der Waltherischen Hof-Buchhandlung.

Frontispiece from Johann  
Joachim Winckelmann,  
*Geschichte der Kunst des  
Alterthums* (*The History of  
Ancient Art*, 1764).

the arts, just as they did for humanist thought in general. In terms of art history, the foundational text by Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, published in 1764, is a case in point.<sup>9</sup> It presented a comparative history of ancient art from Egypt, Persia and Phoenicia to Greece and Rome in order to make the case for the Greek ideal at the origins of Western culture.

I am interested in these different types of response to ancient artworks: the value of the historical or mythic-historical for the weaving of an ancestral tale of Western art, and the aesthetic value that was ascribed to ancient work. It is not because the classical tradition was considered the heritage of the West in opposition to an alien or other Oriental past that it was

*These are on  
a comparative  
or pre-history?*

(and still is) more readily accepted as 'art', although even there we find disagreements, since some scholarship today rejects the notion of ancient Greek art as being, in fact, 'art' and prefers to use terms such as 'artefact' or 'object'.<sup>10</sup> Be that as it may, by the mid-nineteenth century, both Greece and the Near East had become institutionally established – by means of the unilinear narrative of the progress of civilization central to museum displays and historical writing – as the ancestral past of Western Europe.<sup>11</sup>

In this book, I would like to reconsider some of the history of the response to ancient artworks and the uses of the past for a history of art and archaeology. However, my main focus will be on Mesopotamian art, ontology and ancient concepts of representation, which for many years now has been my main area of research and publication. Regardless of our own different forms of responses and uses, what did the ancients think? What was the ontological status of representation or of the image in antiquity? What was the nature of its being in the world? How did the ancients conceive of the relationship between the register of the real and the realm of images? Did they see them as logically separate spheres of being and existence, the one reflecting the other? For the ancient Mesopotamians, the world's oldest literate culture, the world was saturated with signs. Instead of imitating things in the natural world, images and representation in the broadest sense were thought to participate in the real and to have an effect on it in natural and supernatural ways. The ancient Near Eastern understanding of the ontological status of the image was therefore quite different from what we take to be the logical divide between the register of the real and the mimetic representation of that reality. In order to pursue further this enquiry into the concept of representation in antiquity – the relationship between creation and representation – and move beyond concepts of signification to address the place of the aesthetic dimension in the production of 'presence', the conjuring of a presence in images, we must change direction. To do this, we must take into account the aesthetic as a concept, both in its ancient variants and as it is understood by art-historical scholarship. In other words, my claim here is that the aesthetic dimension cannot be separated out in discussing the ancient artefact in its sociohistorical context, or even the

ontology of the image in antiquity at the conceptual or philosophical level. A work's historical dimension is incomplete if we leave aside questions of the ontological category of the work of visual art or the image. These questions, in turn, cannot be asked separately of the aesthetic dimension of ancient works. Perhaps the case for the ancient Near East and Egypt must be made clearer within larger art-historical arguments. Whatever the avant-garde may have thought, the fact that these were two highly literate cultures from which we can find historical information regarding concepts about images and the processes of making artworks opens up possibilities the Modernist avant-garde could hardly have imagined and that art-historical scholarship has barely recognized.

In the following chapters, I will also address concepts of representation in Egypt, Greece and Rome, although to a lesser degree. I leave aside other ancient cultures that provide fascinating information about notions of art and representation for methodological reasons. I do not intend this work to be a broad anthropological survey of aesthetics and ontologies. The four ancient cultures that I have taken up here were interrelated in antiquity in very direct, historically verifiable ways, through trade, diplomacy, cultural exchange, wars and imperialism, although we have too often studied them separately, or, like Winckelmann and the early racial theorists, studied them together in order to consider them as different developmental or evolutionary moments in the history of art. In comparing ancient Mesopotamian or Egyptian art with that of ancient Greece and Rome, I will not compare forms and iconographies, or cultural influences, a topic that has been well addressed in the recent scholarship of antiquity.<sup>12</sup> Instead, I will focus on the similarities or differences in ontologies of art and concepts of representation, which, in my early work, I have called the relationship of representation and the real.

An ancient work of art, even when it is regarded as an aesthetic object and elicits an aesthetic response (for example, from the avant-garde artists), is also a work that embodies time. Bataille, Giacometti and Moore were fascinated by Sumerian art and interested in it for its form, but they were fascinated also because they saw it as originary and archaic, carrying within

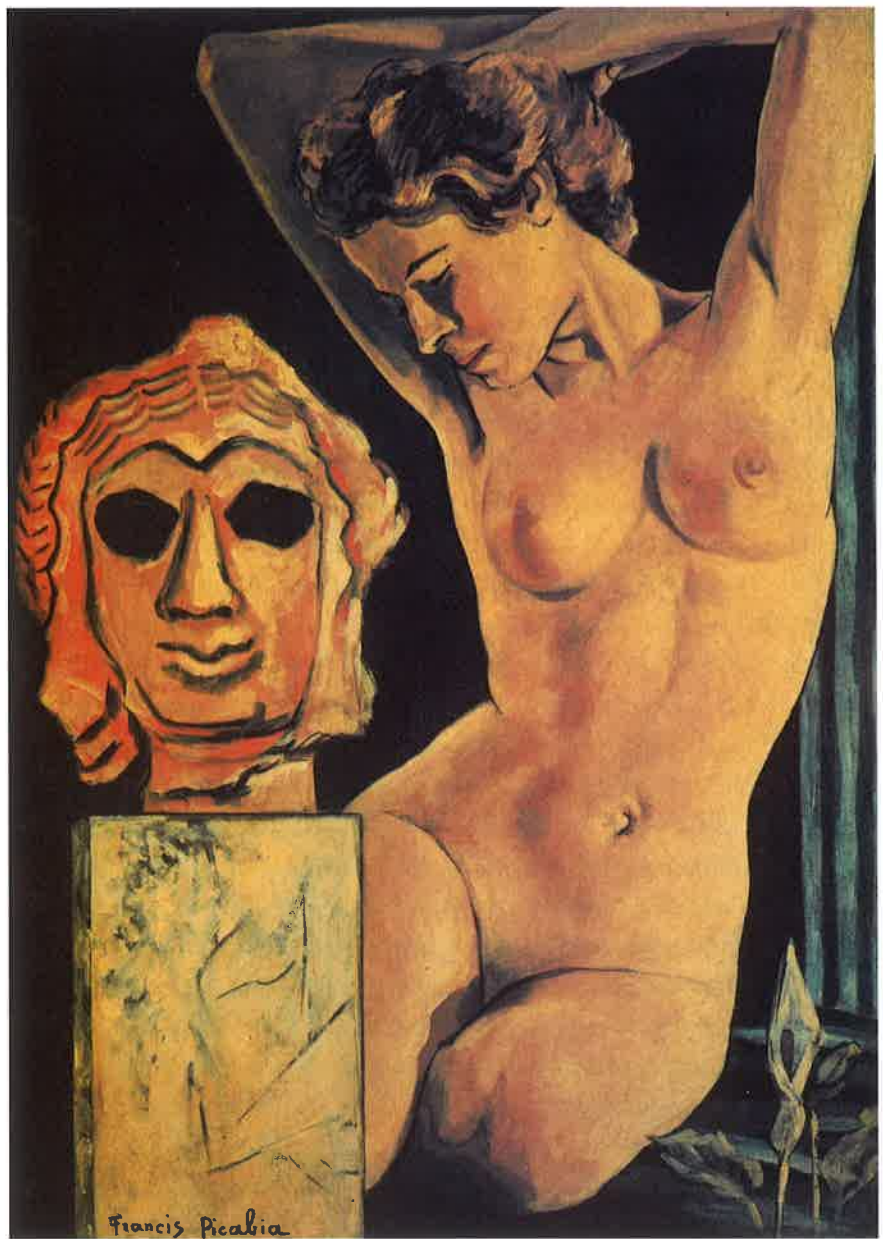
its aesthetic forms a time when man's relation to the world or to the spiritual realm was more direct and perhaps more spontaneous, uncomplicated by the technologies and menacing market forces of modernity. Bataille and his group of dissident Surrealists were interested in the direct and visceral human experience. They had a disdain for idealized art and for the Western humanist tradition that was linked with classical Greek and Roman antiquity. Through art, they wanted to confront things like sacrifice, violence and seduction, which I think that they mistakenly felt were not a part of the classical tradition, due to the way in which the classical had been sanitized for modern consumption. In fact, the relationship of the Modernist avant-garde with classical antiquity was quite complicated. While classical antiquity was rejected by the Surrealists, and was mostly associated with, and utilized by, the anti-modernist politics of the right, Fascism and the Nazis, following the First World War, a large number of artists appropriated classical imagery. Picasso, de Chirico, Léger and Picabia all incorporated images based on well-known ancient classical Greek, Hellenistic or Roman sculptures into their own works. When it came to Greece, the dissident Surrealists and the journal *Documents* devoted themselves to the pre-classical Greek Archaic sculptures, such as the kouroi statues and Bronze Age abstract Cycladic figures. Yet the Near Eastern and Mediterranean past was also at times confused, whether accidentally or deliberately. Francis Picabia's painting *Flirtatious Blonde with a Greek Statue* is an interesting example. It depicts a seated nude, a modern woman with a contemporary-looking cropped hairstyle, seated in a classical pose, similar to an Aphrodite type, and with a figure cleared of any bodily hair, like a pure marble statue. The female nude was based on a photograph of a 'Nude' from *Paris Magazine*.<sup>13</sup> The sculpture to her left is a representation of a female head with large, hollowed-out eyes, a slight archaic smile and abstracted features, placed on a tall pedestal. Contrary to the title of the painting, and to what one might expect, the head is not ancient Greek but a Sumerian work of the early third millennium BC.<sup>14</sup> As a result, we might ask which one is the flirtatious blonde and which one the Greek sculpture. Of course, this interest in the art of the past was a primitivism that ascribed



a utopian era to ancient and foreign works, but there is no question that the aesthetic form of the artwork also drew artists in, catching their curiosity but also their admiration.

This interest in the formal and visual qualities of ancient sculpture is clearly evident. For example, Henry Moore described the British Museum's *Gudea* as 'powerful, with a tense, held in tightness of conserved energy'.<sup>15</sup> Here, in Moore's response, there is something in the *Gudea* that works at a level beyond the ascription of values. To take a phenomenological position regarding art, it is the work itself that elicited such a response through its material, shape and surface, and Moore states this outright in his description: 'It shows a richness of feeling for life and its wonder and mystery, welded to direct plastic statement born of a real creative urge.'<sup>16</sup> In fact, the ancient sculptors seem already to have understood in sculpture something in the form that would transcend its own historical moment. They also seem to have been concerned with a process of visual being in the image, something similar to what recent art-historical writing refers to as the processes of figurability but that was meant to signify well into the future.<sup>17</sup> The *Gudea* statue, with its strong geometric forms, its smooth and lustrous dark-green surface, the exquisitely carved rectangles of the hands and tapered fingers, and its elongated almond eyes and arched brows, is compelling as a visual artefact, but the question remains: is it art?

I have now mentioned two aspects of interest in works of ancient Near Eastern art that are clearly linked. The first is the aesthetic response – or what was construed as an aesthetic response by, for example, the avant-garde when Sumerian works entered this discourse – and the second is the historical context. For the latter, what may at first have been an interest in the hoariness of the mythical-historical, perhaps *originary*, time of world civilization changed quickly. By the mid-twentieth century, the study of antiquities had come a long way from the early antiquarian collecting of curiosities and the treasure hunting of early archaeology. It had become firmly established as a field of scientific research into context, into philological issues, into sociohistorical, economic and political developments. These great steps in the science of archaeology permitted leaps and bounds



Francis Picabia, *Flirtatious Blonde with Greek Sculpture*, 1942-3, oil on canvas.

in knowledge about life in the ancient Near East. The other aspect I mentioned, the aesthetic dimension, was more or less abandoned. In part, this was no doubt due to the fact that the new field of archaeology wished to become a science, unfettered by the arts, seeing them as of use only as illustrations of the past, as windows of historical visualization. In other words, in much of the mid-twentieth-century scholarship on antiquity, an image came to be taken as an unproblematic documentation of the past.

By the 1970s, ideology critique had entered the discipline of Near Eastern studies, primarily through the work of the Italian Marxist scholar Mario Liverani. This new critique argued (and in this, it unwittingly echoed Winckelmann and the later nineteenth-century dictum) that real art is art for art's sake, and since in Egypt and Mesopotamia absolute kings held absolute power, all art was ideology. Much of the scholarship produced within the parameters of this new critique understood the term 'ideology' quite simply as 'false consciousness' and used the word interchangeably with 'propaganda'.<sup>18</sup> The power and propaganda theme became a handy short cut to get to 'the heart of a culture' more quickly (a similar method to what anthropologists have pointed out as the essentialist tropes of early ethnographic writings). This critique took over the discussion about the visual arts of antiquity, where it remains the dominant interpretive theme. Even today, the discipline of Near Eastern studies continues to equate serious theoretical discussion exclusively with the idea of reducing social practices in Near Eastern antiquity to practices in the service of royal power and overt propaganda. On the one hand this seems simply a weak form of scholarship, unnuanced and reductive at best; on the other it might even be pernicious, since it adheres to that old and tired trope of Oriental despotism and should surely be re-evaluated. What I would like to do in the following chapters is to return to the works of art, to images and to that something within them that made up their efficacy and their reason for having been created, but that we have either forgotten or rejected. The ancient image, in my assessment, is not just a form of representation of a pre-existing world, whether truthfully or propagandistically portrayed; it is an entire register of being between levels of representation and the real. This is the argument I am making

On Hook the  
from "art" refers  
to a specific  
set of ideological  
commitments -  
being for the sake  
of many others

Long

here, and this, I think, is probably the case for much of Greek as well as Near Eastern antiquity, despite the rift that we have invented and placed between them for the purposes of our own narratives.

The idea that visual representations are windows into the past, that they can be read directly as evidence of daily life and details of social and historical contexts or hierarchies in antiquity, remains prevalent in the scholarship of antiquity. Archaeologists call visual representations in an excavation context *iconography*, but this term is not to be confused with the more symbolic understanding of iconography in the discipline of art history, a method of reading images most fully developed by Erwin Panofsky.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting that Francis Haskell, who was a professor of art history at Oxford from 1967 until 1995, had already lamented the use of artworks of later European traditions in this way by historians who used paintings as direct evidence or illustrations of events.<sup>20</sup> But the model is deeply entrenched in the field of archaeology and I doubt that it will be given up any time soon. Basically, on this model, the idea is that a work of art unproblematically reflects historical situations or provides evidence of social practices in pictorial illustrations from the past. That means that, as a method, it relies on the unstated (and I would say completely untenable) belief that art is by definition a mimetic activity, the goal of which is to imitate reality as closely as possible. This idea will not survive even a small amount of reflective scrutiny and should really just be dismissed.

Another account that has currency in recent scholarship is the power and propaganda paradigm, according to which the image or the work of art is seen as a reflection not of a reality or a real situation, but of the manipulations of a given ruler. This is a somewhat self-contradictory approach because it seeks, in the very images that it reads as ideological distortions, evidence of the reality of wars or historical events, seeing these propagandistic images as illustrations of the political system itself. The approach is less popular for the study of Greek art (even for the Hellenistic imperial era, remarkably) but is still dominant in Roman and Near Eastern art history. This paradigm has a pedigree going back at least to Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* and to notions of cultural and artistic production being equivalent to forms of




government.<sup>21</sup> Often, like the view that visual representations are windows on the past, these ideas are used as commonsensical knowledge without much of a discussion as to how aesthetic forms and structures of government come to take on parallel shapes that can then be classified by us in a neat and orderly manner. This approach slickly codifies cultures and peoples. It relies on a monolithic thinking that creates fundamentalist divisions into good and bad, free and despotic cultures. Although it is reminiscent in a loose way of Hegel's *Geistesgeschichte*, this account rests on a metaphysics that has never been explained by its adherents. I find the power and propaganda paradigm unconvincing and of interest only as an archaizing form of cultural analysis that shows how idiosyncratic ideas become self-evident truths, and then survive for several centuries. The idea here is that some art doesn't measure up, because it isn't art for art's sake (that is, art that has no utilitarian value). But of course 'art for art's sake' was essentially a short-lived convention that was never really convincing and has long been jettisoned from the study of modern and contemporary art by many scholars of the modern. It is also quite illogically relied upon by the 'art as a window on the past' contingent, who are somehow able to believe that art exists only for itself and that it can serve as documentation of the past at the same time.



Yet another, better and more completely thought-out anthropological approach to ancient art is the material networks and/or material culture model, even though this approach may have its own limitations. This scholarship focuses on artefacts or works of art, as well as the raw materials used for them, as a means of understanding ancient social communication and interaction between states and actors. It takes into account the role that artworks played in social and political interactions across the ancient world where the objects themselves come to have a social agency that enables lines of communication or formations of identity.<sup>22</sup>

A fourth account prevalent in studies of ancient art focuses on the collector's view. This is the current and rather popular argument that ancient sculpture and other artefacts are artworks of universal humanist value that can, and ought, to be collected, especially for and by public museums. In this case, the value of the autonomous art object supersedes the importance of the historical context. It becomes a global commodity. Floating free on the market, its value is calculated in financial terms. Yet it is also largely dependent on the more complicated matter of cultural capital. The idea of humanist value is not a new one, despite all the current discussions about who owns culture and concepts of cultural heritage. From the earliest days of archaeological discovery in the East, the removal of sculpture, or even entire parts of ancient edifices, was described as a charitable rescue mission. When Joseph Bonomi, a British sculptor known for his copies of antiquities at the time, heard that Jean-François Champollion, the decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphs, intended to cut out reliefs from the tomb of Seti I, he wrote to him:

Sir, I have been informed that certain people have arrived here at Gourneh by your orders to cut certain pictures from the tomb in the valley of Biban al Molook [Valley of the Kings] opened by Belzoni at the expense of the late English consul Mr Salt. If it be true that such is your intention I feel it is my duty as an Englishman and a lover of antiquity to use every argument to dissuade you from so Gothic a purpose.



Goddess Hathor  
protecting Pharaoh  
Seti I by placing magic  
collar on him, 1312–1298  
BC. Painted limestone  
relief from his tomb,  
Valley of the Kings,  
Thebes; Louvre, Paris.

Champollion wrote back:

Rest assured, Sir, that one day you will have the pleasure of seeing some of the beautiful bas-reliefs of the tomb of Osirei [Seti I] in the French Museum. That will be the only way of saving them from imminent destruction and in carrying out this project I shall be acting as a real lover of antiquity, since I shall be taking them away only to preserve and not to sell.<sup>23</sup>

Artists and art historians, and those with aesthetic leanings, are often cast in the role of the villain who cares little about context, but the historiography of archaeology often reveals that the story is not really that simple. Adherents of the first two methods described above associate the notion of the aesthetic object with the same ideas as the last group, that of collectors and connoisseurs, so they prefer not to think of the ancient work in aesthetic terms. But what *is* the aesthetic aspect of an ancient work, we might well ask?

From the other side of the scholarly divide, theorists, philosophers and art historians often state that art is a post-Renaissance idea, and that the aesthetic is a post-Enlightenment invention that we owe to Kant, Baumgarten, Burke and Hegel. But even here there is not much agreement. Some (like Richard Wollheim or Hans Belting) think that art proper begins in the sixteenth century; others think the nineteenth century, with its art for art's sake, was the pivotal moment; still others (like Ernst Gombrich) thought it began in the fifth century BC when democratic Athens, being a free polity, permitted the invention of 'true and free narrative art'.<sup>24</sup> In the adjacent field of the anthropology of art, the dominant view is that art is Western and modern, but that all cultures have things that look aesthetically designed. We have to consider each culture's belief or cultural system, that there are multiple ontologies just as there are many modernities and cultural realities. Of course, we are not the only ones to have aesthetic sensibilities or theories about art, speculative thought or historical consciousness. The most influential work emerging out of the anthropology of art has been Alfred Gell's study *Art and Agency*. While this book has been challenged and

critiqued by archaeologists, it has nevertheless had a large impact on the study of ancient art and art practices. Gell's argument, inspired to a great extent by the work of the early twentieth-century French anthropologist Marcel Mauss and his work on gifts and gift-exchange rituals, hinges on the idea that artworks come to have agentive qualities that facilitate social interactions among people. Another powerful argument that Gell made was that artworks ought to be categorized as a group of things according to neither form nor use, but by aspects of technology. Technological processes, linked to processes of ritual enchantment, produce a unique category of aesthetic things.<sup>25</sup>

In philosophy, the aesthetic question has had a resurgence in the last few years, not simply as an aspect of art, but in and of itself, in relation to the larger epistemological questions of scientific enquiry and the ontological anchoring of knowledge. Of course, this is how Kant had originally asked the question within his *Critique of Judgement*, but by our own time the aesthetic had become a censorious notion, associated with the dissolute life of dandies and *flâneurs*, regarded perhaps as an undisciplined form of thinking about or responding to things in the world. Art has always, or perhaps since Plato, been pushed between idolatry and censure. This simple fact ought to make us think about its effectiveness as a thing in the world. At its basis, this tension regarding art is about truth and falsity. After all, Plato's polemic about mimesis was not so much that it was an imitation of a real thing, but that it imitates the effect of Truth.

What I would like to do here is to take up the question of the ontological status of art and the equally compelling question, to my mind, of the effects produced by the work of art. That is, produced by what we might call 'the independent being of art', which is not to say that this being of art, its ontological status in the world, means that it has no function or use value. For a study of antiquity I believe that this is crucial. Ancient Near Eastern art is independent of the resemblance rules of mimesis that link representation to the real, and so is most of Greek art, for that matter, which is a point that I will unfold and stress throughout this book. By independent, I mean that art's goal was not the faithful representation of



a separate reality that has taken place or exists outside the work that then reflects it. If my assertion that, in Near Eastern antiquity, art's goal was not *mimesis* is correct, then where can this observation lead us? Already in my earlier work in *The Graven Image* I argued that, for the ancient Mesopotamians, ontologically, the image was embedded in the real. I will return to some of these arguments here, but I will take my claim one step further and say that art (as a thing) can and does produce effects in the real, that this is not a form of primitive thinking attributable only to the ancients. For ancient Near Eastern art, I prefer to think of this as being more of a *methexis* than a *mimesis*, a form of participation in the real rather than a reflection of it. Often we are happy to attribute to the other, whether the foreigner or the inhabitant of antiquity, forms of irrational belief that we disavow in our own world. Yet art can and does transcend its socio-historical context.

More precisely, I do not wish to claim, following the Romantic schema or Hegelian aesthetics, that art is the appearance of a non-discursive truth. In that schema, art just becomes the body or the matter of the Absolute as subject. Rather, the point I am making is that we have to learn from pre-Platonic thought and move art away from that trap of verisimilitude where it remains, despite a century of Modernism. As I have already said, even much of Greek and Roman art can be far better understood outside the restrictions of the schema we call Platonic *mimesis*, so I want to tear down these artificial, unilinear evolutionary boundaries. Of course, these sorts of schemata, art as an untruth or art as the encounter with the Absolute, cannot explain ancient Mesopotamian or Egyptian concepts of art precisely, because they are theoretical schemata that remain within the logic of *mimesis*. But regardless of questions of *mimesis*, ancient art is neither just fascinating in its form alone, nor only for its cultural context. It is also a place or category that can help us to 'unthink' categories, a kind of *informe* or formlessness, as the Surrealist avant-garde in the circle of Bataille might have said.

The Knidian Aphrodite, made by the Athenian sculptor Praxiteles, is a wonderful example of my argument. This statue, which is now known only through later Roman copies of the classical Greek original made between



The Knidian Aphrodite, Roman marble copy of Greek original of c. 340 BC by Praxiteles.

350 and 340 BC, was first commissioned by the island of Cos for the sanctuary of the goddess Aphrodite, but when Praxiteles completed the statue, it was rejected by Cos as being unacceptably shocking in its nudity. It was subsequently bought and placed in the sanctuary of the goddess at Knidos in Asia Minor. The Knidian Aphrodite became celebrated as the first realistic depiction of the nude female body. While it was a new and rather shocking image of female nudity in the Greek context, Aphrodite's equivalents in Asia Minor, the Eastern goddesses Ishtar and Astarte, were traditionally represented as nude, so nudity for female goddesses was commonplace there, and the cult of Aphrodite in Knidos seems to have had some Eastern influences from the region. In the Greek context, the nudity of the statue was considered to be so remarkable that Aphrodite, upon seeing it, was said to have exclaimed, 'Alas! Alas! Where did Praxiteles see me naked?'<sup>26</sup> The statue seems to have had a very strong impact on ancient viewers, who responded to it as if it were alive.

The story goes that this sculpture of Aphrodite attracted the admiration of a certain Athenian youth who remained behind in the temple at Knidos, after it was locked, in order to be able to 'fully embrace' the beautiful goddess, and that in the morning they found that the passionate young man had left a stain on her thigh.<sup>27</sup> This story, recounted by Pseudo-Lucian, was no doubt apocryphal, but it does reflect nicely how art captivates the gaze, and the absolutely stunning effect of that particular sculpture, the Knidian Aphrodite, which was revolutionary in the development of Greek art in that it was the first nude Aphrodite and then later came to stand for the paradigmatic vision of Aphrodite as we continue to think of her today.

For the ancients, art was far more than art as we generally think of it today, and yet it also encompassed some of our modern notions of art.

The ancients understood the powerful efficacy of representation. In Egypt, magnificent tomb images provided people with what they needed in the life beyond, and the images in the *Books of the Netherworld* helped them to transition between the world of the living and the parallel world of the dead by providing spells, practical instructions and directions for the journey of the soul. These books used to be designated as 'guides to the beyond'. They include the *Amduat*, the *Book of Gates*, the *Book of Caverns* and the *Book of Earth*. In antiquity, they were known as 'books about what is *dat* [the underworld]', and they include images as well as text.<sup>28</sup> Far from being a simple, primitive belief in magical texts and images, this was a way of dealing with some of the most profound fears and existential traumas of human existence. In Rome, where imperial images of power proliferated, let us not forget that the funerary *pompa* permitted the intermingling of the living and the deceased, the present and the past, by

*"Idea  
Hermes  
into image"*

The funerary papyrus of the Singer of Amun Nany, Deir el-Bahri, reign of Psusennes I, c. 1050 BC, papyrus and paint.





means of ancestral images in what can again be seen as a *methexis* rather than a mimesis, despite their sometimes incredibly realist styles and techniques of representation.

The aesthetic dimension opened up entire worlds of being and existence for the ancients that are difficult for us to imagine. Ancient art was magical, we say, but in fact it was much more than that. In Mesopotamian texts, beauty in works of art and architecture, and excellence or skill in the making of artworks, is described in numerous texts. An early second-millennium text from Larsa (for example) describes a silver and carnelian statue as expertly fashioned, a superlative creation, a thing beyond praise.<sup>29</sup> Later, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC) describes his royal statue, now in the Iraq Museum, as a superb work, beautiful in appearance:

"I made a holy, shining, precious statue of alabaster, the workmanship of which was beautiful to look at (and) the appearance of which was excellent. I erected it before the god Adad, my lord. When the god Adad, my lord, looks upon this statue, may he be truly pleased (and) so command the lengthening of my days, proclaim the multiplication of my years, (and) daily decree the removal of illness from my body."<sup>30</sup>

The statue of a Mesopotamian king is both a thing and not a thing, an image and not an image. It hovers between worlds. The image represented, say, Shalmaneser or Ashurnasirpal, but it was also a manifestation of Ashurnasirpal or Shalmaneser as image, in his image form as a facet of being or an emanation, like his name or his offspring. Ancient texts on the images themselves, and on the practices related to the making, installation and movement of statues and stelae, clearly express this belief in the image as an emanation.<sup>31</sup> Many of these statues were kept and preserved for centuries after their moment of production, as we shall see.



*Shalmaneser III, Kurbail statue, 859–824 BC, alabaster, Iraq Museum, Baghdad.*





*Ashurnasirpal II* (883--859 BC), magnesite on red dolomite plinth, from the Temple of Ishtar Belit Mari, Nimrud.

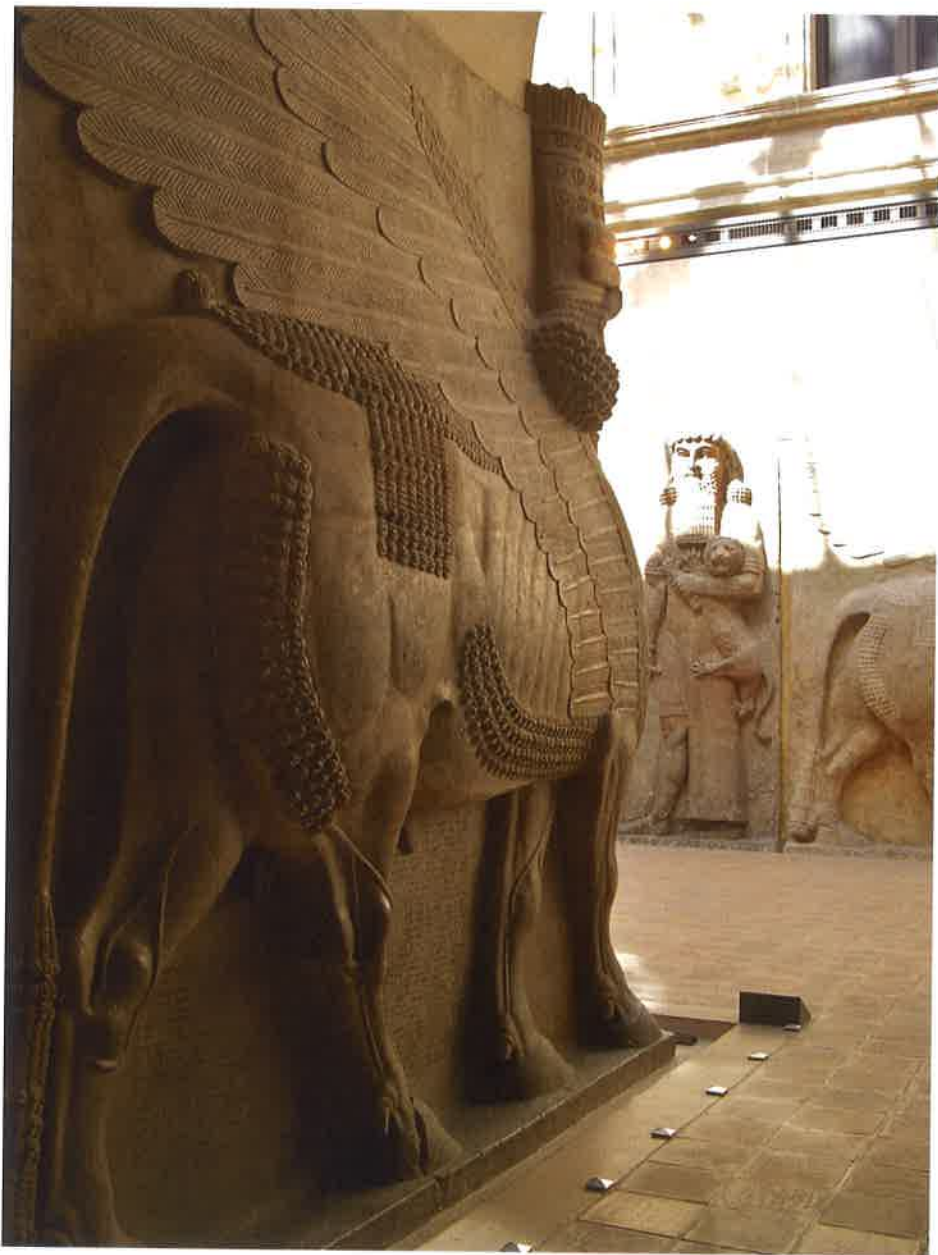


Hero with lion cub, colossal Assyrian relief from Khorsabad, 717--705 BC, gypseous alabaster, Louvre, Paris.

Collecting practices, and the conservation and restoration of older works, are known in both the Near East and in the classical world. The ancients themselves had their own ideas about art and aesthetics and also about antiquarianism. Besides the well-known Greek discussions on these topics, there were canons of proportions for ideal images and ideas of decorum in compositional arrangements in both Egypt and Greece.

Ekphrasis, a form of description we associate with the intellectual understanding of aesthetic quality, and which according to general dictionary definitions was a Greek invention of the Hellenistic era, actually existed long before, in Near Eastern antiquity.<sup>32</sup> The stele of Dadusha, who was a contemporary of Hammurabi of Babylon in the early second millennium BC, carries a long, descriptive inscription of this kind (see pp. 212–13).

Powerful works like the colossal heroes, bulls and lions of the Assyrian palaces were described in ancient texts as having a strong and stunning effect, both beautiful and awe-inspiring. The Mesopotamians had a word for this: *melammu*.<sup>33</sup> This word has many complex meanings of aura and efficacy that have been analysed by Assyriological scholarship. However, one aesthetic aspect that I would like to point out here that has not been recognized is that of the Sublime. The connotations of the word *melammu* include much of what Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, millennia later, were to discover as the aesthetic notion of the Sublime, and which European artists of the early nineteenth century, like Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner, explored in painting, and writers like Wordsworth and Shelley explored in poetry. In the ancient Near Eastern context, *melammu* is part of sculpture and manufactured things when they are truly impressive, but is also associated with the divine and with nature. It overwhelms. The powers of the monster Humbaba in the epic of Gilgamesh are described as his powerful auras, his *melammu*. When he is defeated by the hero, Gilgamesh takes these powers from Humbaba and redistributes them into the landscape. The myth can thus be read as an etiological explanation of how *melammu* came also to be an aspect of the natural landscape. Thus, as in the eighteenth-century European idea, the Sublime was to be found in the natural landscape, and its existence in the landscape was explained by a mythical history of



Assyrian Lamassu portals in the form of human-headed, winged bulls, 717-705 BC, gypseous alabaster, Louvre, Paris.

how things came to be in the world. This overwhelming aspect of the Sublime *melammu* was thus found in nature, in mountains and forests, and also in wild beasts such as lions, in addition to powerful images such as the colossal, human-headed winged bulls and lions of Assyria, the *lamassu*.

The *lamassu* portals are visually sublime, in their awe-inspiring splendour, but they are also an encounter with shifting ontological boundaries and their liminality. They allow you to traverse worlds, effect the transition of space; they are real and not real, they are architecture and sculpture, they stand and they walk, they are animal and human, they are bird and beast, they are both living and stone. They dwell on the threshold in many ways. They are creatures of alabaster stationed at the door. If one approaches them from the front, they are stationary, standing sentry. If one walks through the gate, they are on the prowl. Colossal and eternal in their stony presence, they have a tension and immanence that gives them that uncanny vitality. They interact with our own movement and seem to move as we move, in relation to them. Hans-Georg Gadamer, the twentieth-century philosopher, said that, in order to be art, a work of art must change your world – and ancient art, certainly ancient Near Eastern art, does that superbly.

Like Bataille and the group of Surrealists associated with the journal *Documents*, I am interested in the ‘unthinking’ of categories. I began here with the question of whether ancient art is art, but that cannot be answered without turning to the bigger question of what art *is*. Antiquity is only one area in which to investigate this difficult question, but it is an interesting and productive place from which to consider it, because traditionally antiquity played into the distinction between art/not art in the Enlightenment scholarship which gave us our own notion of what art is. Antiquity is also a good place from which to consider this question because it takes us back to a pre-Platonic world when different ideas of art and aesthetics existed. This was a world that left us vast amounts of writing about images and representation, writings that have not been taken into account in the larger philosophical questioning of the image or aesthetics but which ought to lead us to a reassessment of what we take to be the natural order of representation. This is not a matter of making the argument that ancient art



## THE INFINITE IMAGE

ought to be valued, or considered art, although I think it should. It is more the case that, by excluding it from the realm of art, we are implicitly making a universalizing statement about what art is or can be. So the question takes us back to art itself. The aesthetic, whether it is taken to mean a type of discourse, as philosophers understand it, or the intrinsic quality required of the artwork, as art historians and anthropologists use the term, is a notion that leads us back to the question of the ontological status of images.